Gratitude

**"We receive and we lose, and we must try to achieve gratitude; and with that gratitude**

**to embrace with whole hearts whatever of life that remains after the losses". Andre**

**Dubus II**

Neil Platt's life was unfairly devastated by the rapid progression of Motor Neurone

Disease when he was just 33. It was a disease that had already brought him intense

loss by taking his father just ten years previously. It is a ruthless disease with no cure

and no real form of treatment. His young son, Callum, may well face this horror at

some point in his future.

It is a disease that frightens me intensely. I remember a friend at university having

her father diagnosed with it and describing the rapid deterioration from health and

activity to a body that can no longer move itself at all; not even to swallow or

speak. Throughout its progress the senses remain alive and mental acuity intact so the

sufferer can feel and understand everything but is powerless to move.

That kind of illness seems to me like a prison and one from which there is no escape

and no respite. I don't know that I would be brave enough to bear the injustice of it

and can well understand why someone in that position would lose hope and seek to

end their life. I'm not sure I could bear such loss with gratitude or grace.

Somehow, though, Neil did find some hope and some purpose. He was no longer

able to practice as an architect. He could no longer run around or carry his son. He

could no longer feed himself or even breathe unaided. He had an active agile mind

trapped in an unresponsive body. But he could still communicate and that, for him,

was the greatest freedom that life had to offer. He threw his energy into a blog and

making the documentary "I am Breathing" in the hope that he could raise awareness

and encourage further research with the aim of saving his son from the terror of his

potential inheritance.

He had lost so much yet somehow maintained a cheeky humour and a strong sense of

self. He didn't give in to self-pity, grief or guilt, he kept talking until his last

breath. He prepared an Advance Directive to say that he no longer wanted to continue

with his ventilator when he became unable to swallow or talk. He felt that at this

point he would be of no use to anyone, particularly his son, for whom he still enjoyed

reading stories. It struck me that even at the height of the illness he remained

determined to be of service to others and was grateful for what he was able to do, as

well as the care of those who made that possible, especially his wife.

I am not that gracious a lot of the time. I am someone whose habit it is to look for

what is not there and rail against what is missing rather than what I have. As a child I

was told I had an exam result of 96% and my first response was to ask what I had

gotten wrong. I carried this perfectionism as a badge of honour into adulthood but it

left me dissatisfied and unhappy, never able to live up to this impossible ideal or let

go of it when I tried to connect with others.

It isn't easy to be thankful and I'm not sure that reminding myself of how much I have

compared to others helps much either. It simply serves to make me feel ashamed for

my lack of gratitude and shame has no grace at all. Instead, it is a matter of standing

back, of taking the microscope away from the imperfections to look at the

whole. Even the greatest work of art breaks down if we stare at it too intently. And if

we do stand back to appreciate all we have in this life, in this moment, we can see that

the imperfection is what makes the giving and receiving of love both necessary and

possible and that is the greatest of all gifts.